

Augustine and the Psalms

ROWAN WILLIAMS
Archbishop of Canterbury

To understand what the Psalms “made of” Augustine is to grasp the central issues of faith and ecclesiology as Augustine understood them. To read the Psalms is to make our own voice the voice of the Body of Christ in worship.

The very first sentence of Augustine’s *Confessions* is a quotation from the Psalms, and for the rest of the work hardly a page goes by without at least one such reference. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the narrative autobiographical voice of the *Confessions* is systematically blended with the voice of the psalmist. Brian Stock observes that the use of the Psalms is central to Augustine’s reorientation of “the ethical direction of his conduct:” and, “As he works toward this objective, words, phrases, and verses from the Psalms are reinterpreted within the narrative of the life that he intends to live.”¹

Augustine famously describes the impact that the Psalms made in the early days after his conversion: more than once, he uses the language of being “set on fire” by their words, and he describes how they prompted the expression of his “most intimate sensations” (*de familiari affectu animi mei* [*Conf.* 9.4.8]). Perhaps most strikingly, he can compare the recitation of a familiar psalm with the history of a human life (*Conf.* 11.28.38). The psalm is a meaningful narrative structure, a history of the soul. And souls only have a history in conversation with God, Augustine argues. Without the divine interlocutor, the self is broken and scattered. A perfect knowledge of the self would be like the familiar experience of

¹B. Stock, *Augustine the Reader: Meditation, Self-Knowledge, and the Ethics of Interpretation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996) 114.

knowing the whole of a psalm as you sing it (11.31.41)—but, for us, such experience is not in the normal run of things. What we can do, it is implied, is to imagine a wholeness of experienced history in our lives as if life itself were a text, as if the remembered story of our conversation with God represented part of an intelligible narrative or a single song.

Any reader of the *Confessions* will be aware that, for Augustine, the reading of the Psalms was more than simply a “devotional” reading of a holy text, let alone reading to inform or instruct. The psalmist’s voice is what releases two fundamentally significant things for the Augustinian believer. It unseals deep places, emotions otherwise buried, and it provides an analogy for the unity or intelligibility of a human life lived in faith. Here is a conversation with God that has a beginning, a middle, and an end. And in the course of that conversation, the human speaker is radically changed and enabled to express what is otherwise hidden from him or her. Augustine speaks of what the psalm he is discussing (Psalm 4, *Cum invocarem*) “makes of him”: the act of recitation becomes an opening to the transforming action of grace (*Conf.* 9.4.8).

UNITY OF THE DIVINE AND HUMAN VOICE

The psalm as used in the *Confessions* is thus a kind of digest of the act of faith itself. At the root of this understanding is the assumption that the grace of God changes what we *can* say to God, and so changes what can be said of ourselves. Such a picture, of course, carries with it a number of theological assumptions that need to be drawn out. They are not fully set out in the *Confessions*, but Augustine was already working on them in the early 390s, and they constitute the unifying themes of the *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, the “Expositions of the Psalms,” which he began and continued to deliver from the pulpit as a presbyter during the years of his episcopate. Dating many of these sermons is impossible,² but all commentators on these remarkable texts have agreed that they have a powerful theological unity. My suggestion is simply that this theological unity is illuminated by linking the explicit themes of the *Enarrationes* with the reflections already summarized in the *Confessions* and with some of the wider themes relating to exegesis in other works such as *De doctrina christiana* (or *Teaching Christianity*).

Briefly, the notion of the psalm as proposing a structure for telling a unified story of the soul depends on the insight in the *Enarrationes* that the psalms represent the unifying of the divine and the human voice in Christ. To see Christ as the center of the task of interpretation presupposes the idea in *De doctrina christiana* (like the *Confessions*, dating from the late 390s) of Christ as the one who reveals the entire created universe as a “sign” of God, because he is the supreme *signum* of God’s reality. If we approach Christ, and in particular

²Michael Cameron’s excellent article on the *Enarrationes in Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, ed. A. Fitzgerald, OSA (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 290–306 provides a useful brief overview of the complex chronological issues.

approach his cross, with humility (without which we understand nothing of him), we learn how the humble self-emptying of incarnation and passion open up the full meaning of God as the substantial *res* (thing) to which all signs in their earthly limitedness finally point.

The key passage in the *Enarrationes* is probably in the exposition of Psalm 140, where Augustine identifies two texts fundamental for all Christian hermeneutics—Jesus' question to Paul on the Damascus Road ("Why are you persecuting me?") and the parable of the last judgment in Matthew 25, where Jesus identifies himself with "the least of the brethren." Both of these assert the unity of the Head and the Body in the church: Jesus speaks in the voice of the suffering Christian. This principle is of particular significance where texts in the Psalter express spiritual desolation and struggle: the Psalms are the words of Jesus, the Word who speaks in all scripture. But how can we understand words that imply alienation from God when they occur on the lips of Jesus? Only by reading them as spoken by the whole Christ, that is Christ with all the members of his Body. He speaks for us, makes his own the protesting or troubled cry of the human being, so that his own proper and perfect prayer to the Father may become ours.³

The outcome is a pedagogy of pastoral compassion, partially offered here. In the state of spiritual darkness, we are tempted to think that God is absent, yet when we hear Christ speaking "our" words of anguish, we know that this cannot be so. His humanity is inseparably united with God so that, if he gives voice to our suffering, we know that such suffering does not silence God. This applies at the simplest level to the words of Christ in the gospels, yet it is also what grounds the possibility of interpreting the cries of the Psalms as Christ's.⁴ Obviously, the opening of Psalm 22 (21 in the LXX used by Augustine) is central, and Augustine reverts to it many times: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" is a kind of paradigm of how Christ as Head speaks for the Body.⁵ There is also an interesting phrase in the *Enarrationes* on Psalm 66, where Augustine describes the cry as "God appealing to God for mercy" (*Enarrat. Ps. 66.5*). It is as if we have an anticipation of the twentieth-century theology of Christ's dereliction developed by Hans Urs von Balthasar. The eternal difference in Trinitarian life between Father and Son is what makes possible the identification of the Son with even the most radical state of "otherness" from God or separation from God.⁶

We are not here dealing only with a "pedagogy of compassion." Singing the psalms, in this perspective, becomes a means of learning what it is to inhabit the Body of Christ and to

³Examples abound, but see particularly *Enarrat. Ps. 30.II.i.3, 4, 56.1, 62.2, 68i* and *ii passim, 74.4, 87.14, 90, i* and *ii, passim, 140.5–7*.

⁴*Enarrat. Ps. 93.19* refers specifically to Christ's agony in Gethsemane, but the pivotal question in relation to the Psalms is succinctly expressed in *Enarrat. Ps. 37.6*—how can Christ "voice" the words of Psalm 21 (22):4 with its references to "my offences"? Christ must have assumed the felt consequences of sin, even though he was sinless.

⁵On this point, in addition to the examples already mentioned, and the actual *enarratio* on Psalm 21, see *Enarrat. Ps. 93.15*. Bertrand de Margerie observes rightly that Augustine does not seek to minimize the actuality of Christ's concrete human suffering by connecting it with the human condition in general (*Introduction a l'histoire de l'exegese.III.saint Augustin* [Paris: Cerf, 1983] 120 n. 31).

⁶See, above all, Balthasar's *Mysterium Paschale: The Mystery of Easter*, tr. A. Nichols (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1990) and the fifth volume of his *Theo-Drama* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1998).

be caught up in Christ's prayer. Just as Christ makes his own our lament, our penitence, and our fear by adopting the human condition in all its tragic fullness as the material of his Body, so we are inevitably identified with what he says to his Father as God (e.g., *Enarrat. Ps.* 30 (ii) 3–4; 74.4; 142.3). Our relation to Christ is manifested as multi-layered: “[H]e prays for us as our priest, he prays in us as our Head, he is prayed to by us as our God” (*Enarrat. Ps.* 85.1). The meaning of our salvation is that we are included in his life, given the right to speak with his divine voice, reassured that what our human voices say out of darkness and suffering has been owned by him as his voice, so that it may in some way be opened to the life of God for healing or forgiveness.

Augustine does not offer an exact prescription for the imitation of Christ; it is more that he underlines the inevitability of passing through the cross if we are to speak fully with the voice of the divine Son. This is spelled out at some length in *Enarrat. Ps.* 119.1.⁷ The Pauline or deutero-Pauline idea of “making up what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ”

(Col 1:24) is given a fresh twist in *Enarrat. Ps.* 51.4, where Augustine speaks of paying our dues to the *res publica* of which we are citizens through our suffering: what we now endure is what the entire Body of Christ must suffer. The Body is—in

The psalm is a meaningful narrative structure, a history of the soul. And souls only have a history in conversation with God.

historical terms—more than the Head regarded as a thing in itself. If we, therefore, as baptized Christians suffer, especially through persecution from non-believers, this must be part of what the *totus Christus* must endure—part of what the eternal Son has already accepted as the means by which Christ will heal the world. The Head-and-Body theology thus provides not only a pastoral understanding of what any believer suffers, but an interpretation of it as creatively building up the outworking of Christ's saving act in contingent history. It is not only that Christ accompanies the sufferer, sharing his or her pain; the sufferer is drawn into the action of Christ that ultimately overcomes all sin and grief.

A CHRISTOLOGY OF HUMILITY

The interconnection between hermeneutics, Christology, and the doctrines of grace, salvation, and the church is extraordinarily tight. As so often with Augustine, it is hard to disentangle anything that could be called a “purely” doctrinal exposition, but it should be clear that the *Enarrationes* are a major source for understanding the heart of his Christology (and have been curiously underused in some accounts of that subject). Readers of the *Confessions* will be familiar with Augustine's insistence (especially in the concluding chapters of Book 7) that Christian faith cannot be understood without humility since Christ

⁷Cf. *Enarrat. Ps.* 51.1, 52.2, 53.4, 93.5, 102.4.

himself is only encountered when we come down to the level at which he has chosen to live, the level of ruined and scarred humanity (*Conf.* 7.18.24). His own life is the way toward understanding the mystery of his person and work; sharing that life is the ground of true doctrine about him. Christ not only shows the way but *is* the way (*Enarrat. Ps.* 58.1.7). So the humility implicit in making the language of the Psalms our own—a language of doubt, near-despair, repentance, and lonely suffering, as well as praise and thanksgiving—is the acceptance of that human condition that Christ embraced in his incarnation.

As we truly assimilate the identity of the psalmist as paradigmatic human sufferer and struggler, we assimilate the identity of Christ who chooses those same words as his own; and thus we are given to speak the words that Christ speaks to the Father, because the humility and love that grounds his acceptance of our condition is the expression of the eternal love that unites him with the Father. What is distinctive about any hermeneutic of the Psalms is that singing them is quite simply and literally an appropriation of Christ's life, in history and eternity. And, from this act of appropriation, the church as a whole is revealed as the community where humanity is allowed full scope to say what it is, in terms of its failure and pain, so that it may fully become what it is created to be, the multiple echo of the Word's response to the Father. "Do not hear anything spoken in the person of Christ as if it had nothing to do with you who are members of the Body of Christ" (*Enarrat. Ps.* 143.1).

The argument traced in both the *Confessions* and the *Enarrationes* has obvious and predictable affinities with that of the *De civitate Dei* (*The City of God*), whose definition of the divine commonwealth is set in opposition to any imaginable variety of individual or corporate self-assertion.⁸ It also resonates with the themes that Augustine develops more fully in the anti-Pelagian works, which repudiated any idea that we could take as a theological starting point an individual will seeking to make peace with God. The dual foundation of the theology of our texts thus far is the eternal difference of Father and Son within the Trinity coupled with the decision of the Son to take human flesh so that the creature's difference might be subsumed in the loving and joyful difference that is the Son's response to the Father. The divine act, in other words, is necessarily the first thing we have to consider, an act that is primarily and simply the active being of God exercising the divine nature in the life of the Trinity and derivatively the Trinitarian action that is focused and expressed in the Son's incarnation. What effectively grounds substantial things in that reality is the highly distinctive activity of reciting the Psalms and so following the "contour" of the act of incarnation.

⁸The *locus classicus*, of course, is *De Civ.* 14.28.

THE CHURCH

The church's worship, then, is not accidental or marginal to the church's very being. Obviously Augustine has much to say about the Eucharist as the prime locus for discovering ourselves as the Body;⁹ Nevertheless, the singing of the psalms becomes the most immediate routine means of identifying with the voice of Christ. And that identification carries implications for the kind of mutual relation that concretely defines the life of the church.

It is not only that Christ accompanies the sufferer, sharing his or her pain; the sufferer is drawn into the action of Christ that ultimately overcomes all sin and grief.

We have noted the pastoral implications of Augustine's ascribing our expressions of weakness to Christ, who speaks for us. But the *Enarrationes* have more to say about the life that should be normative in the Body, since (following the classical exposition of the theme by Paul) Augustine clearly espouses the

notion that such a community ought to be one in which each member supplies what is lacking for the other. The Body should also be a locus for attending to the other's specific needs, which may be material but are just as likely to be spiritual (*Enarrat. Ps.* 125.13). We should beware, as Paul warned us, of thinking we know what the most important gifts are (and so the most important people): why worry if you cannot work miracles? God has many services to perform, and the faithful action of a mundane task is no less an essential element of the Body's life. Better a healthy finger than a diseased or blind eye, says Augustine with characteristic pungency, even though the eye is apparently a "greater" contributor to the Body's life and welfare (*Enarrat. Ps.* 130.8).

So the notion of the Body as a place of mutual attention and service leads us back, yet again, to the central theme of accepting human limitation. The incarnational embrace of the prose of human existence means that the least spectacular act of authentic faith and obedience is validated by God, even though our preoccupation with dramatic success may hide it from our eyes. And the principle is applied also—with a clear aim at the Donatists—to living with the visible imperfections of the church: we have absolutely no way of knowing whose faith will prove victoriously secure at any given moment, thus we have no way of deciding that a person needs no help from us or we from them. And if that is so, we take a considerable risk in trying to separate ourselves from the supposedly wicked (*Enarrat. Ps.* 99.9–11). The more there is love, the more suffering at the lovelessness of others in the church (*Enarrat. Ps.* 98.13, referring to Paul in 2 Cor 11). But such love is precisely what we have to offer the loveless within the Body; thus the cost must be borne.

⁹See, e.g., *serm.* 229.1, 272.

OUT OF THE DEPTHS

Central to nearly all of Augustine's theology is the assumption that we think about God and speak to God only from our setting within time and the body. The *Enarrationes* address this in various ways. For example, *Enarrat. Ps.* 129.1 ("Out of the deep have I called . . .") identifies the "deep" as this present life, just as *Enarrat. Ps.* 41.13 identifies the abyss with the human heart, which we never fully know during our earthly life (a recurrent theme in the *Enarrationes*).¹⁰ The repeated emphasis on hope and unfulfilled desire as the heart of Christian discipleship (as in *Enarrat. Ps.* 89.15, 129.10, 138.20 and countless other instances) likewise places the psalm-singer firmly in the world of incompleteness and yearning, with all the pain this entails. For Augustine, the "spiritual" reading of at least these portions of scripture does not evade or relativize the "historical" sense, which roots us in our own present history, not simply in a scriptural past. Perhaps more accurately, the voice of the incomplete and struggling past as recorded in scripture, most poignantly and directly in the Psalms, is allowed to become our voice when we renounce the temptation to grasp for a timeless peace without a time-bound discipleship of suffering and penitence. The connection with the themes of Book 7 of the *Confessions* is again very evident. Here Augustine's experience of what might be called frustrated mysticism (Platonic contemplation that delivers a vision but not a habit of life) is both countered and resolved by an apprehension of Christ in scripture that insists on a practice of reading that guides our growth and is rooted in humility (see particularly 7.21.27).

Thus, the most spiritual reading for Augustine will always lead us most directly to humility. Where literalism is to be rejected, it is because it proposes to us a static object of knowledge capable of possession and thereby fails to stir us to longing for the greater fullness of God.¹¹ So there is a paradoxical dimension to his hermeneutics: what most locates us in our earthly experience in all its reality is what most opens up the fuller sense because it most prompts desire. And, as noted earlier, the Psalms offer a particular way of structuring the time of the believer's life, so that the present is always oriented to Christ's future.

HOLINESS

We have seen how the holy life always begins with a Christlike acceptance of humanity's finitude, of an incomplete, sinful, and frustrated present moment (including the sin of both myself and my fellow Christians). What makes this acceptance the gateway to a true *narrative* of the soul? The exchange between Christ and the human self, which the Psalms encode, moves the present moment toward the goal of created things because of Christ's action. What I am now is transformed into a moment in the history of Christ, who in

¹⁰Cf. *Enarrat. Ps.* 118. 15.7–8 on the "night" of this world in which our hearts are hidden from each other.

¹¹Spelled out in the first book of *De doctrina christiana*; cf. R. Williams, "Language, Reality and Desire in Augustine's *De doctrina*," *Journal of Literature and Theology* 3 (1989)138–50.

accepting the conditions of this world employs what they offer so as to bring about the fruition God intends. Christ is the supreme *signum*, the point of greatest transparency within the world to its divine origin. The human present, accepted by the believer, becomes therefore a kind of *signum* in Christ, a reinscription of scripture.

Augustine's definitions of holiness are thus bound up with scripture. However, it is not so much in the sense that the Bible *tells* us what holiness is (though that is undoubtedly part of what the Bible does) as in the fact that scriptural language models how the world manifests God—most explicitly in the language of penitence and growth. In *Conf.* 7, Augustine turns to Paul when frustrated with Platonism (just as it is to Paul that he turns in Book 9 at the crucial moment when he recognizes once and for all how his unconverted will frustrates its own operation and liberty). The Psalms functioned for him as a dramatized version of Paul's analysis of the human state, of Paul rendered for performance. Scripture defines the character of a life in conversation and communion with God; and it is most fruitful for the believer when it provides a "script" for such a conversation. First and foremost, however, we must recognize that the essence of Christ's own action in the incarnation is a matter of "transfiguring" the human voice,¹² which, in turn, is essentially a matter of defining a *communal* voice that is nonetheless the only medium for the truly personal voice. Christian rhetoric is distinctive in that it gives unarguable place to stumbling or derivative performance. Such performance reminds us of the fact that *this* rhetoric seeks to persuade us not of this or that case or party in the world but of God's "case." Faithful discourse insists on its own inadequacy in unambiguous ways.¹³

SOUL AS "SIGN"

The Christian life that functions as a *signum* is fractured by the awareness of sin (and sorrow for sin). But it is also a life consciously identified with the *signum* of Christ's fractured and suffering life, culminating on the cross. Such identification is enacted not only through sacramental practice but also through the recitation of the classic texts of frustration and hope, the Psalms, in which the divine adoption of the human voice is so keenly expressed. As these texts are recited, the *profundum* of the human heart, never known to us in fullness, is opened up by God. What we do not and cannot know about our past, present, and future is given over to God, who will draw out of us cries and aspirations that more and more clearly give voice to what is hidden in us, knowing that all this elusive human agenda unrecognized within us is embraced in the incarnation and may be employed by Christ in his work.

Augustine describes in the *Confessions* the effect of the Psalms upon him as the process

¹²See M. Cameron, "Transfiguration: Christology and the Roots of Figurative Exegesis in St. Augustine," *Studia Patristica* 33 (1997) 40–47.

¹³See *De doctr. christ.* 4; cf. the study by Karla Pollmann, *Doctrina Christiana* (Freiburg: Universitätsverlag, 1996), and her article "Hermeneutical Presuppositions," in *Augustine Through the Ages*, especially p. 428.

that, in *De doctr. christ.*, he describes as being educated out of that mistaken love that tries to contemplate what it should be using—i.e., love that treats as ends what should be means. And although he does not put it quite like this, we could summarize his theology of the Psalms in terms of learning not to regard the soul as an object of contemplation but as a “sign.” Augustine is so regularly treated as the great apologist of introspection that this may sound odd at first. But the point is that our examination of the self as Christian believers is meant to bring us to the recognition that the inner life, instead of being a sanctuary of stability, is both profoundly mysterious to us (the dark *profundum* of the *Enarrationes*, the “caverns” of *Conf.* 10.8.13) and the locus of our deepest awareness of frustration. The practice of psalmody as Augustine is already defining it in the 390s paves the way for the ultimate analysis of this theme in the later books of the *De Trinitate*.¹⁴ Introspection can indeed reveal (as in *Conf.* 7.17.23) the superior nature of the unchangeable. The mind looking on itself can glimpse the supremely desirable goal of beholding the reality that is not vulnerable to circumstance. But it is precisely the mind’s capacity to recognize this and its incapacity to hold the vision that poses the problem that, for Augustine, can be resolved only through the incarnation with its summons to, and enabling of, humility.

Thus, the most spiritual reading for Augustine will always be the one that most directs us to humility.

So, to return to the beginning of the *Confessions*: the opening quotation from the Psalter sets the tone for the rest of the book. By electing to cast the story of his life in the form of a direct address to God, Augustine weaves his own apostrophes in with the language of the Psalms themselves. To tell a truthful story about myself, I must look to my memory not as a simple repository of impressions but as containing God (see *Conf.* 10.24.35). My memory is thus a recording of the pervasive recognition of dissatisfaction with static and limited goals for desire, a record of the radical hopefulness that looks toward an end that cannot be fully determined or described from where I now stand. And so, to tell a truthful story about myself, I must be speaking to the only interlocutor who is not just another subject in time with another contingent perspective to offer. I must be exposed to Truth itself in person.

The Psalms demonstrate that such an address can be formed into a kind of unity. To call it an “aesthetic” unity would miss the heart of Augustine’s purpose and practice. It is certainly a unity not easily reducible to a simple record of the evolution of ideas or the accumulation of experiences, culminating in an optimal present situation. Augustine famously articulates in the tenth book of the *Confessions* that his present situation in no

¹⁴An excellent overview of recent shifts in the interpretation of this among Augustinian scholars may be found in L. Ayres, “The Fundamental Grammar of Augustine’s Trinitarian Theology,” in *Augustine and His Critics: Essays in Honour of Gerald Bonner*, ed. R. Dodaro and G. Lawless (London and New York: Routledge, 2000) 51–76.

way resembles a plateau of achieved virtue or inner calm. Perhaps the unity more resembles a consistency of tone or register; I do not know at all what the substance will be of what lies ahead, but I know what key it can be sung in so that it accords with God's purpose. And if what lies ahead continues to engage with God directly and honestly, God will still be able to shape it as God pleases, whether or not its shape ever becomes visible to me on earth. It is in heaven that we shall read the text that is God without obscurity—a text that is simultaneously the ordered creation, scripture, and the radical love of the Word, the Son (see *Conf.* 13.15.18).

The psalmodic pattern explains why the *Confessions* is and is not an “autobiography.” It seeks not to give an exhaustive account of this person's past, or to make a case in favor, but only to create a text that has the sort of unity that a psalm has. This may explain why the concluding books turn with such apparent arbitrariness to the widest possible issues about time, creation, and the Trinity. And in the creation of that narrative unity, we are not obliged to understand what cannot be understood, or to anticipate the judgement that can come only at the end of the temporal story. We must only continue to be faithful to the vocal “register” of psalmody, with its personal address to God and its naked awareness of human need and failure. Put this alongside the repeated insistences of the *Enarrationes*, and it can be seen how this is also the prescription for identifying our individual narratives with that of Jesus. It is not that we are simply and instantly assimilated to his objective sinlessness, any more than he is assimilated to our objective guilt. What holds the two stories together is our reproduction of Christ's acceptance of the fallen and struggling condition to which we are without exception destined. And in that identification of narratives, the narrated human life of the believer becomes a sign of God.

CONCLUSION

I have attempted to systematize what Augustine, of course, did not. But the interconnections of what he was writing and preaching, especially in the last decade of the fourth century, are inescapable. These texts offer perhaps the clearest links that may be discerned between a doctrine of grace, a doctrine of Christ, a doctrine of signs and sacraments, and a practice of self-scrutinizing humility expressed in psalmodic prayer. Augustine's theological exposition is seldom systematic; we have to work with him and follow the connections he makes. And yet such labor at least clarifies the inseparability of these themes in what he writes and preaches, and warns against an abstraction of his doctrine from his pastoring. We may also, as I have hinted, learn better how to read some of the central arguments of both the *De civitate Dei* and the *De Trinitate* if we attempt an understanding of what (as he puts it) the psalms “made of him.”

In one of the passages already referred to near the end of the *Confessions* (13.15.18), Augustine imagines how the angels praise God: they “read” without trouble the purposes of God that we must decode in a material text. From their reading, they know what to choose and how to love. *Legunt, eligunt, et diligent*, says Augustine in an untranslatable wordplay:

“they read, they choose, they love.” Although the angels are under discussion here, Augustine’s analysis of what is involved in the simple act of singing a psalm suggests that the same memorable triplet could be applied to us, once we have learned the skill of reading properly. Having once discovered how to make the voice of the Body of Christ in worship our own, we read in order to choose God (and not be bogged down in the world of signs), and to love the Father, to whom the Body of Christ by grace always speaks, and the Body itself, in whose historical imperfections and manifold human needs we discover the only perfection available to us, in the life of a community marked by hope.

A vertical bar on the left side of the page, consisting of a yellow-to-white gradient with a small red diamond at the top.

COPYRIGHT INFORMATION

TITLE: Augustine and the Psalms
SOURCE: Interpretation 58 no1 Ja 2004
WN: 0400102660003

The magazine publisher is the copyright holder of this article and it is reproduced with permission. Further reproduction of this article in violation of the copyright is prohibited. To contact the publisher:
<http://www.union-psce.edu>

Copyright 1982-2004 The H.W. Wilson Company. All rights reserved.